

# Memory studies in a moment of danger: Fascism, postfascism, and the contemporary political imaginary

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## Abstract

Inspired by Walter Benjamin's concept of the "moment of danger," this essay considers the contemporary return of the memory of fascism and Nazism among both far-right political movements and liberal and left critics of the right. We briefly sketch how memories and symbols derived from the fascist and National Socialist era, among other sources, help constitute new political subjects in our moment of danger, and we look extensively at responses to the election of Donald Trump and evaluate the way the invocation of the fascist era as memory and warning shapes versions of resistant remembrance. We argue that transnational memory studies needs to think more about the historical consciousness that buttresses contemporary far-right politics and about the potential memory politics that might oppose it.

## Keywords

memory studies, Nazism, racism, transnational, Walter Benjamin

In the famous 1940 essay, the German-Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin ([1940] 2006) asserts,

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. (pp. 391–392)

These lines resonate powerfully for many of us today. For Benjamin ([1940] 2006), the moment of danger was, of course, the ascendancy of fascism and Nazism in Europe, and the memory that flashed up to be appropriated by the historical subject was that of history's vanquished: "enslaved

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ancestors”(p. 394). For us in the present, the moment of danger is that of Trump and Brexit, Jobbik and Golden Dawn, Putin, Erdogan, Modi, Le Pen, and el-Sisi, and the memory that flashes up is that of fascism itself. For Benjamin, the question of whether the historical subject could indeed appropriate that memory as it flashed up meant wondering whether the historical subject could direct its hatred at its real oppressors and sacrifice itself for the right cause, or if its capacity to do so had been so atrophied that all the historical resources that could constitute a tradition of the oppressed had fallen into fascist hands.<sup>1</sup> For us, no longer so confident of our ability to identify “the” historical subject, the questions seem different. What does it mean for the memory of fascism to flash up today? What would it mean to “appropriate” it and how would we do so? What, in fact, do we remember when we remember fascism? Is such memory illuminating or does it distract us from what is really happening before our eyes?

In this essay, we argue that scholars should take seriously the mnemonic flash of fascism that has accompanied the transnational surge of far-right political movements in the past decade, but that they should do so in a critical mode that does not take continuities between past and present for granted. The question of memory is urgent in this context not just because of the high political stakes involved in confronting the political imaginary of far-right movements but also because so many of the discourses *responding* to these movements mobilize memories of the Holocaust and interwar European fascism. Our focus in this essay is thus not primarily on the far right itself, but especially on the intellectual opponents of the right who attempt to grapple with its rise by viewing it through the lens of fascism. We find that a powerful, if often contradictory, politics of transnational memory and forgetting is at play among liberal/left scholars as well as right-wing activists. An approach inspired by methodologies in memory studies can help make sense of this haunting present, yet the challenges of the present also call out for new directions in our field.

Benjamin’s thought has inspired those who seek to reclaim the memory of the vanquished—a tendency that is strongly represented in what Erll (2011) calls the “third stage” of memory studies—but Benjamin also urges us to pay attention to the transmission of the conqueror’s memory. In another frequently cited passage from “On the Concept of History,” he writes,

There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. (Benjamin, [1940] 2006: 392)

While most discussions of Benjamin stop after the first of these sentences, his thesis on the entanglement of civilization and barbarism also proposes that the transgenerational transmission of cultural memory is fundamental to conquest and domination. In specifying that “all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors” and that what the rulers inherit are “spoils” carried in a “triumphal procession,” Benjamin ([1940] 2006) suggests the need for a memory studies project that has mostly fallen by the wayside with the turn toward cosmopolitan forms of transnational memory (p. 391).<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by Benjamin, we believe memory studies needs to think more about the historical consciousness that buttresses contemporary far-right politics and about the potential memory politics that might oppose it. The memory of extreme forms of nationalism, racism, and reaction is not only the property of its victims, who have been central to much of the globalized memory discourse of the last decades; rather, nationalist, racist, and reactionary memories also help transmit the traditions of nativism, populism, and fascism that are referenced in far-right movements today. The memory of the right constitutes a distinct field of struggle that has not yet received adequate attention from scholars of either memory or fascism.<sup>3</sup>

The tools of transnational memory studies—especially its focus on the interplay of different scales within and beyond the nation—can be useful in approaching memory on the right.<sup>4</sup> But

today's far-right memory complicates the proximity often assumed between transnational dynamics and cosmopolitan remembrance; it draws on decidedly transnational mnemonic resources, yet channels them into narratives of racial purity. In a further paradox, far-right memory seems to embrace both mnemonic traditions we have identified in Benjamin: both the memory of the vanquished and the memory of the conquerors. This dual memory structure is central to the far right's ability to situate itself as a victimized group that simultaneously embraces past projects of domination. Although not an entirely new phenomenon, this transnational, racist nationalism has intensified, we believe, because of both the successful extension and perpetual crises of economic and cultural globalization.<sup>5</sup> Successful economic and cultural globalization establishes transnational links that can be exploited by the right as much as the left, while its crises exacerbate the conditions that inspire and mobilize far-right nationalist movements.

Our project differs from that of those who seek the "correct" historical analogies for describing contemporary right-wing movements. Instead of trying definitively to diagnose these movements through reference to exemplary histories, we first take a step back to ask how memories, rhetorics, and symbols derived from the fascist and National Socialist era, among other sources, help constitute new political subjects in this moment of danger—regardless of whether they are ultimately best described as fascist themselves. Against the backdrop of this reactionary transnational memory, which deserves further study, we look extensively at responses to the election of Donald Trump and evaluate the way invocation of the fascist era as memory and warning shapes versions of resistant remembrance. In charting what the historian Enzo Traverso has called the "confusing cacophony" of contemporary memories of fascism, we both point to the pitfalls of too urgent an insistence on reading the present conjuncture through the lens of historical fascism and acknowledge the force and value of a critical refunctioning of that memory, not least for memory studies itself.<sup>6</sup>

## Remembering from the right

Although the rise of the right has been visible for the last decade, the Brexit vote in June 2016 followed by the election of Trump in November 2016 intensified mnemonic activity on all sides of the political spectrum. In this section, we briefly survey some of the discourse on the right as it calls upon the politics of the 1930s and 1940s.

Shortly after the US election, Richard Spencer (2016), the guru of the so-called "alt-right," gave a speech that quickly went viral among both those who welcomed his nationalist vision and those who were shocked by it.<sup>7</sup> Addressing followers at his innocuous-sounding "National Policy Institute" conference, Spencer drew explicitly, if allusively on Nazi commonplaces, calling the media the "Lügenpresse," as he put it, "in the original German," and referring to Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film when he described Trump's election as a "victory of the will." He then concluded with the lines "Hail Trump. Hail our people. Hail victory"—unmistakable rhetoric when translated back into "the original German," which inspired members of his audience to raise their arms in the Nazi salute. References to Jews in Spencer's speech are sparse, but at times clearly derive from antisemitic tropes, as when he referred sarcastically to "a wealthy Jewish celebrity bragging about the 'end of white men.'" A few months later—following the April 2017 bombing of Syria ordered by Trump—when tensions were emerging between Trump's White nationalist advisor Steve Bannon and his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner, Spencer used Twitter to indulge further in barely veiled anti-Jewish sentiment: "No one voted for Kushner. Indeed, many of us voted against people like Kushner having power." Simultaneously, Spencer led a demonstration in front of the White House that reportedly included "signs saying the Syrian attack had been conducted on behalf of Israel."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the persistence of antisemitic and Nazi tropes in Spencer's rhetoric, however, these are not the only prominent elements of the "alt-right" discourse (which sometimes even claims admiration for Zionism as a form of ethnic nationalism). In his post-election speech, Spencer linked these transnational memories of Nazism and antisemitic libel to more nationally specific forms of racist memory. Embracing the genocidal process of North American settler colonialism and invoking a fantasy of racial purity, Spencer claimed, "America was, until this last generation, a white country designed for ourselves and our posterity ... It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us ... To be white is to be a creator, an explorer, a conqueror." In embracing the memory of conquest, Spencer seems to corroborate Benjamin's insight that "all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors." Implicit in Benjamin's phrase is the claim that the inheritance of conquest is not limited to a distinct national-historical tradition. Mixing an American discourse of White supremacy with a European discourse of fascism and antisemitism, Spencer's speech suggests the way the far right thrives on multidirectional memories of empire and genocide, which it shares and transmits across borders.

More recent events, such as the White supremacist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia, and elsewhere in fall 2017—which deployed Nazi and more broadly European racist symbols and slogans in their defense of Confederate monuments—confirm the degree to which a transnational memory politics is central to contemporary far-right ideology and strategy.<sup>9</sup> Yet, despite the embrace of the memory of conquest, the Charlottesville rally also demonstrates the extent to which White supremacist memory is channeled through an identification with historical defeat, whether it be the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, the myth of the "stab in the back" that motivated National Socialism, or the defeat of the Nazis themselves. If there is anything peculiar to the memory of the far right, it may be this ambivalent melding of explicit memories of conquest and implicit memories of defeat.

Spencer and his ilk remain marginal to the actual centers of power in the United States, despite the media frenzy around the "alt-right": the neo-Nazi memory of domination and defeat is not (yet) a dominant memory. Nevertheless, at the center of US politics, the Trump administration has indulged in a politics—including a memory politics—that suggests that far-right ideology may be closer to power than it has been for decades. Trump slogans such as "Make American Great Again" and "America First" have revived memory of native fascist currents, in particular, the America First Committee, an "isolationist, defeatist, anti-Semitic national organization that urged the United States to appease Adolf Hitler" (Dunn, 2016). Even as figures directly identified with the far right, most notably Steve Bannon, but also Sebastian Gorka, an alleged member of a Nazi-affiliated Hungarian group, have left, the administration has repeatedly—either deliberately or by virtue of incompetence—raised the specter of fascism. Not since Reagan visited the Bitburg cemetery—and thus essentially paid his respects to the SS (Schutzstaffel) officers buried there—has an American administration aligned itself so closely with the whitewashing of Nazism and the relativization of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, for instance, the administration released a statement that deliberately failed to mention the persecution and extermination of European Jews.<sup>11</sup> And—again in response to the Syrian situation—Trump spokesman Sean Spicer compared Hitler favorably to Assad and claimed that Hitler had never used chemical weapons on "his own people," thus seeming to "forget" the hundreds of thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans who died in gas chambers in the "euthanasia" program and Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> The frequency of such slights suggests that far from being accidental, this politics of selective remembering may be intended to send signals to the right wing of Trump's constituency. In particular, the combination of the Remembrance Day omission and Spicer's "slip" suggests a strategy to demarcate who counts as one's "own people"—and, thus, who is susceptible to be cast out as the enemy of that people. While the message is (White) nationalist, the field of reference for its articulation is decidedly transnational, with memory and forgetting of the Nazi genocide of European Jews playing particularly critical rhetorical roles.

The US situation possesses a distinct dynamic that cannot be collapsed into the situation in Europe or in other parts of the world, yet the incoherence and cacophony visible in the US also represent a signal characteristic of the contemporary transnational right. Today's European right-wing movements are internally differentiated as well, of course, but also affiliated through concrete networks and shared rhetorics and ideologies. Whether mistakenly or not, they have seen Trump's election as a galvanizing moment. Indeed, Germany's far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), convened an international gathering in Koblenz of right-wing leaders—including Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders—that coincided with Trump's first day in office. Eight months later, the AfD became the first extreme-right party elected to the German Parliament since the defeat of National Socialism. While the contemporary instantiations of such parties in Western Europe have tried to downplay their connections to what Traverso calls the "historical matrix of fascism," their politics of memory invariably resuscitates versions of Holocaust denial and relativization that call up that lineage as well as the more stumbling version of the Trump administration. Thus, the AfD's Bjorn Höcke used the 75th anniversary of the Wannsee Conference—convened to coordinate the Nazi genocide of Jews—to call for a "180-degree turn" in the country's relation to the past and thus a rejection of its highly developed culture of Holocaust remembrance.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Le Pen—who usually distinguishes herself from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen's negationism and who went on to attract ten million votes (33.9%) in the second round of the French presidential election in 2017—denied France's historically documented responsibility for round-ups of Jews during the Holocaust and has surrounded herself with associates who are "well-known former members of a violent, far-right student union that fought pitched battles with leftists and took a turn toward Hitler nostalgia in the mid-1990s" (Nossiter, 2017b).<sup>14</sup> Such revisionism and "nostalgia" are paired in some cases—particularly in Central and Eastern Europe—with outright celebration of nationalist movements that collaborated with Nazi occupying forces and often possessed their own antisemitic traditions.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that contemporary right-wing memory possesses what Traverso (2016) calls a "confusing cacophony" (p. 635) of tendencies should not imply that such memory cannot be understood. In a prescient book, historian Dan Stone (2014) provides a useful framework for making sense of this contradictory discourse of historical memory. Stone argues that the stability of postwar Europe was built on an antifascist consensus that entailed repression of the most troubling aspects of the Second World War, including especially "widespread collaboration with Nazism" and "the failure to prevent its rise" (p. viii). In other words, Stone suggests, the "postwar consensus went hand in hand with a particular memory" (p. ix) politics built on a form of selective remembering. This form of selective remembering repressed an identification with defeated ancestors—those who collaborated, sympathized, or quietly welcomed the arrival of the Nazis and the departure of the Jews, communists, and Roma, and who perhaps still recall *those events, rather than Nazism's defeat*, as moments of triumph. With the end of the Cold War, the consensus collapsed, undoing the structuring principle of antifascist memory and with it the impediments to a publicly articulated fascist memory. Stone helps us see that the frequently observed globalization of Holocaust memory that followed the end of the Cold War and accompanied the third stage of memory studies has always been shadowed by a more invidious counter-discourse characterized by resentment and the embrace of (defeated) projects of conquest.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the results observed by Stone look very much like the far-right discourse we have sketched here and derive, in his account, from a reaction against the previously hegemonic politics of memory.

Traverso's (2016, 2017) own account complements Stone's in helping make sense of the contemporary moment: he understands the "postfascist" turn—a concept to which we return later—as heavily indebted to the collapse of leftist future-oriented utopias and the impact of neoliberal hegemony. These factors help us chart the resurgence of the right beyond Europe in places like

Turkey and India where histories other than the Second World War need to be taken into account (e.g. histories of empire and colonialism). Building on Stone and Traverso, we hypothesize that the return of fascist memories can be understood in two distinct, but overlapping ways simultaneously: it is a symptom of systemic crises, including the end of the Cold War and the dead-end of neoliberal hegemony; *and* it is an overdetermined symbolic site in the struggle to respond to those crises from a position of radical uncertainty.

### Mapping the cacophony: three models

Here we want to shift our attention from the far right's transnational memories to recent discussions among liberals and leftists that take up the question of whether, and how, to read the resurgence of the far right in general and the rise of Trump in particular through the lens of fascism. We have identified three main moves in this debate, each of which articulates a different relation to the memory of fascism (and each of which resembles, coincidentally, moments of the Hegelian dialectic): affirmation of a strong identity between the present and historical fascism, negation of such an identity, and the qualified affirmation of identity with difference. Neat as that may sound, within each moment of this schema, distinctions and differences inhere. Everyone remembers a slightly different fascism and takes something slightly different to be at stake in recalling it in the present. This confusion should not surprise: the *concept* of fascism has long been contested among scholars. Why should reflection on its historical memory and potential revival be any different?

We start with the most widely circulated attempt to present the rise of Trump through the lens of fascism: that of the historian Timothy Snyder. Shortly after the US election in November 2016, Snyder (2016) wrote a provocative essay, titled "Him," for the online magazine *Slate*.<sup>17</sup> Rather than writing in the voice of the comparative historian, as in *Bloodlands*, his 2010 bestseller that juxtaposed the murderous regimes of National Socialism and Soviet Communism, Snyder here adopts a more literary persona and crafts a kind of parable (Snyder, 2010). "Him" traces how an unnamed demagogue, skilled at manipulating the media and given to spreading conspiracy theories, comes to power after a surprising election result in which he fails to receive a majority of votes. The demagogue eventually falls from grace but not before he has set in motion a murderous regime that commits "mass killing on a stupendous scale."

The uncanny effect of Snyder's essay arises from the way he describes the rise and fall of Hitler in terms that initially echo the rise of Donald Trump.<sup>18</sup> Midway through the essay, however, a break takes place. After recounting the initial ascent of the Hitler/Trump figure, Snyder writes, "The terrorist attack came as a surprise. It was unclear whether he planned this himself, but it hardly mattered." This turn, apparently referring to the Reichstag fire and its consequences, inaugurates a paragraph in which Snyder narrates the shift toward a "one-party state" premised on the exclusion of political opposition and the "legal stigmatization of a chosen minority." Later, war joins terrorism as "a surprise," and the projects of totalitarian control and genocide reach their pinnacle, before self-destructing. While this moment takes us into aspects of German history that seem to have no immediate parallel in Trump's America, it also rests upon an intentional temporal and referential ambiguity. "The terrorist attack"—rather than, say, the terrible fire—is a self-consciously contemporary term that rewrites the past in the language of the present and calls on an affectively charged *topos* (terrorism). This rhetorical strategy produces a strong impact because it interpellates a reader who can combine what we *know* about the past with what we *feel* about both the past and the present: like the act of remembrance, it is simultaneously cognitive and affective. This strategy of abstract, speculative comparison also allows Snyder to circumvent the question of whether to regard the Trump regime as fascist in order to pose a related, perhaps more urgent one: given what the new regime uncannily reminds us of, where might it be going, and what can we do about it?

In taking us from the election to war and genocide, Snyder's story is deliberately *alarmist*. It recalls a series of historical surprises—"his election"; "the terrorist attack"; "the war"—to suggest that, precisely because we can recall them, they should *not* be surprises to us now, or, rather, that they are surprises that we should be prepared for and know how to respond to, particularly because the earlier surprises have so vividly flashed up in a certain collective historical memory. The surprises recall the past as it appears to us, in Benjamin's words, at a "moment of danger," to describe a possible, plausible future, and to prescribe, *through the memory of the past*, when the danger was neither recognized nor opposed in time, what needs to be done to prevent such a possible future from being realized.

Yet if ringing the alarm is salutary, it also seems to have a strange kind of temporality that brings to mind what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick labeled "paranoid reading." Sedgwick sought to redescribe a hermeneutics of suspicion that distrusted all appearances and that had, she believed, become hegemonic in certain fields that were pervasively concerned with hostility, oppression, danger, and threat. Particularly pertinent is her observation that paranoid reading is always anticipatory:

The unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because there must be no surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known. (Sedgwick, 2003: 130)

Where Sedgwick's paranoid readers exhaustively scanned the surfaces of the new world order of the 1990s for bad surprises, Snyder writes, instead, for a twenty-first-century audience that has repeatedly found itself caught off guard by large-scale events that evaded prediction (while also being entirely predictable): terrorist attacks, the global financial crisis of 2008, the return and ascent of the far right, the current crisis in Europe. And he seems to be indicating that these surprises—not the events themselves but our inability to reckon with them—are the product of a failure of transnational historical memory.

Certainly Snyder seeks to anticipate the future by remembering the past not because he thinks it is set in stone but because he wants to work out how to alter its apparent course. Nevertheless, his abstract, speculative narrative might be taken to suggest that we should, on the basis of certain fascist-looking elements before us, be able to see fairly precisely where and how this story might be heading. Such claims would seem to fail the present precisely because they confuse legitimate concern about the emergence of far-right politics in the US and elsewhere with the claim that we know just what that means and where it will take us. It's telling that, all demurrals aside, Snyder can confidently predict that we have a year at most to save American democracy (Kolb, 2017). At such moments, Snyder's position begins to resemble what Lauren Berlant (2017), thinking specifically of the "crazy" response to Trump's election, calls a *genre flail*: the urge to give structure and form to events and phenomena that are unsettling precisely because we don't know what they mean, where they are going, or how best to fight them. Yet if Berlant's notion usefully diagnoses the desperation of making sense of the present, her list of just what counts as a genre flail—any "lists of things to do, to pay attention to, say, to stop saying, to discipline and sanction" any "prefab frames," any "writing toward the future"—seems to have no truck with historical memory at all. If Snyder seems trapped by historical memory, Berlant seems to strip us of any recourse to it. While the middle road may be the only one that does not lead to Rome, there is surely a path to be steered between these two relations to the past.

Although Snyder insists on seeing parallels between the 1930s and the present, others counter that such echoes and parallels obscure more than they illuminate. A number of historians and political scientists have argued that the contemporary far right in general, and the Trump regime in

particular, need to be understood as *not* fascist but rather populist.<sup>19</sup> Of course, populism is at least as contested a concept as fascism—arguably more so, since many on the left see it as a purely ideological term used to discredit criticism of liberal democracy—and one with a far less self-evident connection to historical memory. But for those who make the case, this is part of the point: a less obvious but more revealing and relevant comparison. Thus, for example, in the early months of the Trump regime, the historians Dirk Moses, Federico Finchelstein, and Pablo Piccato (2017) argued that to understand Trump, we had to look not to Hitler and Mussolini but rather to the Argentinian General Juan Perón's authoritarian populism. They suggested that while Perón himself was a "former fascist" and his *ideology* had a fascist shape and genealogy, because his regime was not a dictatorship, and functioned without "high levels of political repression and violence," it could not properly be called fascist. Instead, they argued, Perónism achieved electoral success through public programs and the expansion of "social and economic rights"—crucial elements of authoritarian populism. Since, according to Moses, Finchelstein, and Piccato, Trump, like Perón, seemed more interested in the support of his base than the material intimidation of his opponents, he too, they believed, had to be seen through this lens.

Around the same time, political scientist Sheri Berman (2017) also suggested Trump, Marine Le Pen, and others were best understood as right-wing populists rather than fascists, but she did so by appealing to a very different account of the historical past. Interwar fascism found acclamation, she argued, precisely because it offered a "powerful alternative" to the failure of interwar Western European democratic institutions to address the crises of their time; fascism did so by creating jobs, expanding the welfare state, subordinating the interests of business to those of the state, and seeking to reestablish national pride.<sup>20</sup> In other words, if Berman had seen in the Trump regime the same programs and initiatives that Moses, Finchelstein, and Piccato thought made Trump comparable to Perón, *she would have regarded him as a fascist*. But precisely because she thought such things were just what he *failed* to offer, he remained, for Berman, merely populist.

Nine months later, Moses, Finchelstein, and Piccato may well think differently. While Trump is patently obsessed with shoring up the support of his base, it is by now evident that he plans to do so not through public programs and expanded social and economic rights but rather through racist immigration laws, systematic attacks on the media and the judiciary, and the malignant neglect, even planned dismantling, of all institutions of government regulation. Suggestive as it might have been shortly after Trump's inauguration, the memory of Perón now seems no more instructive, or no less distracting, than those of Hitler and Mussolini. Yet that moment—when it seemed possible to read Trump as a Perón-like figure—is itself worth remembering. The contrast between Moses, Finchelstein, and Piccato's case for Trump as authoritarian populist and Berman's remains interesting for just how radically different their accounts were of what it meant to contrast populism with fascism, and of where populism locates us in historical time. Moses, Finchelstein, and Piccato presented authoritarian populism as a full-fledged political form itself, which might begin to spread throughout the rest of the world. For Berman (2017), in contrast, populism appeared not so much a proper political formation as what emerges during a crisis *that has not yet been resolved*: "Right-wing populism—indeed, populism of any kind—is a symptom of democracy in trouble; fascism and other revolutionary movements are the consequence of democracy in crisis." On one hand, we find populism understood as a kind of mature, reproducible form; on the other, as a warning sign to democratic agents and institutions, presenting them with a choice: New Deal or *Volksgemeinschaft*. These early responses reveal how different historical memories and accounts of populism, and of its relationship to fascism, produce different accounts of how far along we are in the evolution of the far right today, and what steps might still be available to oppose its rise.

If Snyder represents the memory of fascism in the mode of its abstract identity, and Berman and Moses, Finchelstein, and Piccato mobilize what we might call the memory of fascism in its



determinate negation, the third option is what, continuing our loose borrowing from a Hegelian framework, we can call the memory of fascism in its speculative or concrete mode. Scholars such as the historian Enzo Traverso (2016), the political theorist Alberto Toscano (2017), and the theorist-activists Lia Haro and Romand Coles (2017) all recognize the distinct differences between the fascism of the interwar years and the regimes of the current conjuncture. These analysts take the contemporary reemergence of something *like* interwar fascism as *axiomatic*: Traverso speaks of post-fascism, Toscano of late fascism, Haro and Coles of neo-fascism, each term self-consciously recalling the historical political formations that first gave rise to the concept of fascism while differentiating itself in time from that original context. For Traverso, Toscano, and Haro and Coles, the differences between the present regimes and interwar fascism are not reasons to reject the comparison, but rather the sites at which *the historical particularity of the present form* of something like fascism stands most clearly revealed. Thus, for example, both Traverso and Toscano read the absence of a utopian vision or new myth as reflective of a postideological period no longer struggling against the Bolshevik Revolution. Haro and Coles (2017) read Trump's inconsistency, unpredictability, and lack of ideology as indicative of a new kind of sovereignty that is absolutely unaccountable, even to itself, and that operates through the "hyperintensification of shock politics as such" (p. 100).

Traverso and Toscano also self-consciously articulate their concepts via distinctive confrontations with historical memory. Traverso, indeed, confesses that there is much he finds inadequate and inappropriate about contemporary invocations of fascism, but that the term has become unavoidable in debates about the far right; its public use is a function of "collective memory" as much as historiographical interest. He proposes the concept of postfascism as a way to track both continuities and transformations between past and present and to acknowledge that these new phenomena are still emergent, transitional, and contradictory (Traverso, 2016: 636). In sketching the notion of postfascism, Traverso recalls the historical context of interwar fascism itself, not to use it as an ideal type against which to test the present, but in order to recall the context-dependence of apparently definitive features of fascism and thus to rethink just how they might be translated in the twenty-first century. He reminds us that the interwar paramilitary forces and street violence that characterize fascism for many commentators need to be understood as specific to the brutal conditions of a Europe shaped by revolutionary violence and total war, and suggests that in twenty-first-century Europe, which has largely been at peace for 70 years, the function of that violence—cultivating, spreading, and exploiting fear—must now be read as served by modern media and communications technology (Traverso, 2016: 638). By thinking fascism in terms of mutations and translations, Traverso is able to track the transformation of an interwar fascism that proposes an irrationalist, antisemitic, anticommunist mythic utopia into a postfascism that offers postideological, xenophobic defenses of universalist and enlightenment values against the perceived threats of Islam and globalization.

Although he shares Traverso's historical master narrative, memory serves two quite different roles for Toscano. Methodologically, he explores the value of remembering earlier *theories of fascism* as a productive, self-reflective way of making a judgment about fascism today. Tellingly, Toscano (2017) accords a special weight to *postwar* reflections on fascism—particularly Theodor W. Adorno's in the 1950s and Pier Paolo Pasolini's in the 1970s—and observes that the exploration of "forms of fascism in a post-war, i.e. post-fascist, context is perhaps more instructive for the present than the interwar philosophical reflection on fascism as a phenomenon." Toscano's contribution, then, might be also understood as testing the heuristic value of the memory of fascism.

Moreover, what seems primarily to distinguish late fascism from interwar fascism for Toscano is an epochal shift in the nature of historical memory itself. Here, his key interlocutor is Ernst Bloch. Toscano (2017) takes Bloch's concept of non-synchronism to propose that "both socially and psychically many (indeed most) Germans in the interwar period lived through social forms and

psychic fantasies embedded in different rhythms and histories.” For Bloch (as for Benjamin), these modes of historical memory and life forms represent “declining remnants of pasts whose hopes remain unquenched.” While “easily recruited into the ranks of reaction” (Toscano, 2017), these remnants can also be “salvaged” and turned to revolutionary utopian ends. But with the end of what Toscano variously refers to as historicity, temporality, and certain forms of lived experience—a constellation of terms that we could classify under the broader rubric of historical memory—late fascism is stripped of non-synchronicity and thereby also its utopian potential through the redemption of past hopes. Instead, “coal workers” pose with Trump, presenting for Toscano the fantasy of the “industrial worker-citizen” and “the nostalgia for Fordist modernity, the utopia of a post-utopian age” (Toscano, 2017). Toscano builds here on Pasolini, who in the mid-1970s already saw the “obliteration of the past” and in particular “the death of the experiences linked to peasant and ‘popular’ times and forms of life” as what made the “new fascism” (Toscano, 2017) of contemporary Italy more insidious than Mussolini’s: the obliteration of the past meant the obliteration of resources with which to resist and combat fascism.

In his mobilization of Pasolini, Toscano thereby begins to differentiate among historical forms of fascism according to the memories they enable or destroy. Yet, despite his diagnosis of the obliteration of historical consciousness, Toscano’s own account of late fascism testifies to the ongoing relevance of the *memory* of past critical and theoretical engagements with different incarnations of the far right. In “remembering” and reclaiming the contributions of Adorno, Bloch, Benjamin, and Pasolini, Toscano opens up a space in which we can recognize the novelty of the present through the constellations it forms with a series of past moments of danger.

## Conclusion

In “The Reichstag Fire Next Time,” an essay that reads as a pointed rejoinder to Snyder’s parable of Hitler and Trump, the journalist Masha Gessen (2017) calls upon the memory of Nazism but re-routes it through a different historical constellation than we find in Snyder’s account. Gessen acknowledges that in our moment of danger, we inevitably “find ourselves talking about the Reichstag fire,” and she provides a narrative that seems to echo Snyder’s: “The Reichstag fire, it goes almost without saying, will be a terrorist attack, and it will mark our sudden, obvious, and irreversible descent into autocracy.” But Gessen’s essay takes a very different turn. In place of the “future-oriented vigilance” that Sedgwick sees characterizing paranoid reading and that we find in Snyder, Gessen draws attention to a series of *past* moments of danger. “Every galvanizing event of the past eighty years has been compared to the Reichstag fire,” she writes, and goes on to mention even more distant moments when crises have been exploited through invocation of emergency powers: from “the Alien and Sedition Acts at the turn of the nineteenth century” to Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus and Woodrow Wilson’s Sedition Act. Ultimately, for Gessen, the Reichstag fire that matters most to contemporary politics lies not in some fearfully imagined future but in our recent past: “That we seem so certain of the outlines of the Reichstag fire to come reveals the fact that it has already occurred.” It is not the election of Trump—and whatever might come next—but rather the attacks of 11 September 2001 that constitute the consequential event whose impact needs to be contested. Indeed, Gessen argues, the response to 9/11 by *both* Republican and Democratic administrations created the conditions of possibility for Trump.

In place of the short-circuit connecting Trump and Hitler or the new far-right movements and interwar fascism, Gessen sketches a heterogeneous timeline that is both longer and more condensed. In asking her readers to consider the *longue durée* of states of emergency alongside the more recent legacies of Bush and Obama—including the “siege mentality” that Bush fostered and the “mass deportations” over which Obama presided—Gessen practices a more radical politics of

memory than we find in either the abstract identification with fascism or the negation of fascism represented by our first two models. Like the representatives of the third model sketched above—and in a Benjaminian spirit—Gessen seeks to cultivate an historical memory that can uncover patterns and constellations while remaining vigilant about the specificity of the contemporary conjuncture. This politics of memory strikes us as more radical than that practiced by the representatives of our first two models for two primary reasons. First, it draws into consideration a larger range of histories than the more straightforward Hitler/Trump analogy (or the outright rejection of that analogy). Second, in pointing to the forgetting of recent (and more distant) histories that the Hitler/Trump analogy facilitates, Gessen also suggests that traditional parties and mainstream positions have contributed to the present catastrophe; she thus interpellates her readers as themselves implicated in the crisis. The straightforward Hitler/Trump analogy, in contrast, leaves readers with a thin historical memory focused on just two “exceptional” moments and in a comforting position of virtue from which to observe the catastrophe.

Our plea for a memory studies engaged with the memory of the far right is not premised on a belief that the twenty-first century is likely to see a repetition of the catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century. Our catastrophes are and will remain our own. Yet the transnational memory of fascism that has arisen in recent months is not merely a smokescreen that distracts us from the present: it is a symptom of global transformations and a site of contestation among political imaginaries. To grasp the present as a moment of danger, we need both to pay close attention to the spread of the far right as it manifests itself in divergent forms around the globe and to consider the deeper history of crisis and emergency that has enabled authoritarian claims on state power. At the same time, we need to remain skeptical of the equation of dangers past and present that the resurgent memory of fascism sometimes encourages, while continuing to recognize memory, in all its diverse, heterogeneous strands, as a vital resource for political critique that orients our expectations and might guide our actions.

## Notes

1. Benjamin makes this argument across several of his theses. See especially Theses VIII–XIII.
2. Our own work has not been exempt from this turn. See, for example, Rothberg (2009).
3. The memory of the far right has not been completely absent from the fields of memory and fascism studies, but thus far it has not been at the center of the most influential research programs in either of those fields.
4. See especially De Cesari and Rigney (eds) (2014).
5. For an approach to the longer-term transnational dynamics of particular national fascist traditions, see Mannone (2015) and Mannone et al. (2012). Although questions of memory occasionally play a role in this work, it is not generally put at the center of analysis.
6. See Traverso (2016, 2017). On cacophony, see also Byrd (2011).
7. The text of Spencer’s 19 November 2016 speech can be found on the website of *Radix*, the online journal he edits with the title “Long Live the Emperor!”: <https://www.radixjournal.com/2016/11/2016-11-21-long-live-the-emperor/>, posted on 21 November 2016. A video of the speech is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xq-LnO2DOGE>. As of 10 April 2017, it had been viewed more than 142,000 times.
8. For a report on Spencer’s response to the events in Syria, see <http://www.haaretz.com/us-news/1.782706>. See also Krupkin (2017).
9. For the transnational influences on the Charlottesville march, see Williams (2017). Williams writes, “White-supremacist protesters mashed together Nazi and Confederate iconography while chanting variations of [right-wing French intellectual] Renaud Camus’s *grand remplacement* credo: ‘You will replace us’; ‘Jews will not replace us.’”
10. On the Bitburg affair, see Hartman (1986).
11. See Dawsey et al. (2017).
12. See Snyder’s (2017b) unpacking of Spicer’s statements.

13. For an account of the right-wing summit as well as Höcke's speech, see Connolly (2017).
14. See also Nossiter (2017a).
15. See accounts of Slovakia and Ukraine in the *New York Times*: Lyman R (2017) and Dolinsky E (2017).
16. On globalized Holocaust memory, see Levy and Sznajder (2006).
17. See also Snyder's (2017a) *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. In *On Tyranny*, Snyder draws on other histories for lessons beyond that of National Socialism and including, especially, Soviet Communism.
18. Snyder is hardly alone in comparing Trump to Hitler or regarding Trump as a fascist. Other well-known examples include the *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani, the neoconservative intellectual Robert Kagan, and liberal journalists like David Remnick and Adam Gopnik.
19. In addition to those discussed here, see also Müller (2015). Traverso (2016) acknowledges a certain "national populism" within postfascism, but sees populism as a "political style" that says nothing about content and has no heuristic value (p. 649).
20. See also Berman (2016).

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